

# Love Not Lost: Two Childhood Cancer Survivors Marry at St. Jude



Lindsey Wilkerson and Joel Alsup were married Sept. 1 at the Danny Thomas/Alsac Pavilion at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis. Both had been patients at the hospital when they were children. Credit: Credit Houston Cofield for The New York Times

**By Vincent M. Mallozzi**

Sept. 7, 2018

Lindsey Wilkerson was given a tour when she first began working in the event and patient-liaison department at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis more than 14 years ago.

As she made her initial rounds through the pediatric treatment and research facility that day, a staff member said to her, "There's someone here we would like you to see."

Ms. Wilkerson, who had been married for less than a year at the time, was led to a small conference room where she was thrilled to be reintroduced to Joel Alsup, a friend she first met in 1993, when she was 12 and he was 13. They hadn't seen each other since high school.

"I remember having a huge crush on him as kids," she said.

He liked her as well, but had trouble expressing his feelings. "She was very pretty," said Mr. Alsup, who had been hired in January 2003 as the hospital's information and technology coordinator, "but I was an extremely shy 13-year-old who was afraid to talk to her."

It was indeed a rather impromptu reunion, the kind of get-together that would not have been promised to either of them two decades earlier, when Ms. Wilkerson and Mr. Alsup were childhood cancer patients receiving treatments at what is now their current place of employment.

"St. Jude saved both of our lives," said Ms. Wilkerson, who is still in the event and patient liaison department.

She learned in 1991 she had acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

"I remember the terrified family," said Dr. Melissa M. Hudson, the pediatric oncologist who first treated Ms. Wilkerson and is now a member of the St. Jude faculty and the director of its Cancer Survivorship Division.

"She had lots of ups and downs in her treatment and she struggled with toxicity," Dr. Hudson said. "She was a strong little girl."



The bride just before the wedding ceremony. The couple reconnected more than 14 years ago when Ms. Wilkerson began working for St. Jude. Mr. Alsup was already employed there. Credit Houston Cofield for The New York Times

Four years earlier, Mr. Alsup and his family learned he had osteosarcoma, a type of bone cancer, which resulted in the amputation of his right arm.

“Joel was 7 years old, and he was having a hard time buckling his seatbelt, and I thought he was just messing around,” said his father, Bob Alsup. “We used to play catch with a tennis ball in the den, and I saw he was reaching for the ball with his left hand. I knew something wasn’t right.”

Ms. Wilkerson, now 37 and Mr. Alsup, 38, said they are cancer-free, but are required to submit to medical exams every five years to monitor their health.

In the meantime, they said, there’s a lot of work to be done.

“Joel and I desire to give these patients the love and care that was given to us at their age,” Ms. Wilkerson said.



Mr. Alsup, now a supervisor in the creative media services division of the hospital, said, “Coming back to a place that’s so dear to our hearts has been one of the greatest honors of my life.”

Ms. Wilkerson, who grew up in Crane, Mo., and Mr. Alsup, born and raised in Chattanooga, Tenn., first met at a St. Jude fund-raising event in 1993.

“Both of our families were invited to speak and share our personal St. Jude journeys,” Ms. Wilkerson said. “I remember being very impressed with Joel, he was really cute and he had a great sense of humor.”

In the ensuing years, Ms. Wilkerson and Mr. Alsup would cross paths at other St. Jude functions, or whenever their medical appointments overlapped.

They eventually lost touch, when both went to college — she to the University of Central Arkansas, where she received a degree in communications, and he to Middle Tennessee State University, where he majored in television production.



Brent Powell, an Episcopal deacon and the head chaplain at St. Jude, officiated at the ceremony, which took place beneath bouquets of hydrangeas and roses.  
Credit Houston Cofield for The New York Times

“My dream, from the age of 10, had been to come back to work at St. Jude,” said Ms. Wilkerson, who spent immeasurable time serving as a volunteer fund-raiser for St. Jude during her college tenure. (The American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities, or Alsac, is the fundraising and awareness organization for the hospital.)

In May 2003, between college graduation and landing what she called her “dream job,” as an assistant in the event and patient liaison department, Ms. Wilkerson got married. Her marriage lasted 12 years until she divorced in 2015. She has a 12-year-old daughter, Audrey, and an 8-year-old son, Jacob, from that relationship.

“When I became a mom, I began looking at these young patients as if they were my own children,” Ms. Wilkerson said. “I used to think, ‘I know what they’re going through, I’ve been there,’ but having children of my own shook me like an earthquake, it really changed my perspective.”

Mr. Alsup said that “being super close,” to Ms. Wilkerson’s children also allows him to see things from a parental perspective.

“Lindsey’s kids are the same ages as we were when we received our cancer treatments,” he said. “Seeing them live normal lives means so much to us, and gives us a greater appreciation of our own parents, and all parents of children with cancer who deal with such difficult circumstances.”

Mr. Alsup also said that the day Ms. Wilkerson “walked back through the door at St. Jude,” was the day a friendship was reignited. “For the better part of 12 years, we became the best of friends,” he said.

Their relationship remained platonic until two and a half years ago, when they began to turn a romantic corner.

“We connected on the complexities of our situations, and how it changed the way we see the world,” Ms. Wilkerson said. “We have this almost sense of urgency about living life, this gratitude, this desire to give back.”

In September 2016, Ms. Wilkerson was watching the movie “Alien” — a gift from her daughter — with her old buddy at his home in Memphis. When it ended, Mr. Alsup had something to say, and this time, he wasn’t afraid to say it: “I love you,” he told her.



The newlyweds hopped into the back of a 1959 white Ford Fairlane convertible en route to the reception at Old Dominick, a distillery in downtown Memphis. Credit Houston Cofield for The New York Times

Ms. Wilkerson swiftly returned an “I love you” of her own.

“Remember, I liked him first,” she said, laughing. “So the ball had been in his court for nearly 25 years.”

Ms. Wilkerson’s mother, Ginny Cook, said that her family was delighted when her daughter began dating Mr. Alsup.

“We’ve known Joel’s family as long as we’ve known him,” she said. “We were so pleased when they started seeing each other. He’s wonderful to our grandchildren.”

They were married Sept. 1 at the golden-domed Danny Thomas/Alsac Pavilion, named for the comedian who founded St. Jude in 1962. (Mr. Thomas, who died in 1991, and his wife, Rose Marie, who died in 2000, are buried in the pavilion's garden space.)

Brent Powell, an Episcopal deacon and the head chaplain at St. Jude, stood beneath decorative bouquets of white hydrangeas and white roses as he and the groom watched the bride walk down the aisle. She was flanked by her father, Bob Cook, and Richard Shadyac Jr., the chief executive of Alsac. Both men kissed her and went to their seats.

"During your youth, a cancer diagnosis invaded your life, but you endured and defeated it," said Mr. Powell, who has known the couple for more than 30 years.

"Now you are giving back, paying it forward," he said. "You are two of the most loving people I know."

"It only took you 20 years to confess your love," Mr. Powell added to laughter from the approximately 150 guests, "right after you watched the movie 'Alien.'"

During their exchange of vows, the bride's daughter, Audrey, who served as maid of honor, cried, and then laughed while brushing aside her tears. Later in the ceremony, she and her brother each lit one of four unity candles, as did the bride and groom, in honor of the family they are forming.

Image





As the couple drove away, many guests, some of whom were cancer survivors, tossed navy and white heart-shaped confetti. Credit Houston Cofield for The New York Times

After they were officially married, the newlyweds hopped into the back of a 1959 white Ford Fairlane convertible en route to the reception at Old Dominick, a distillery and event space in downtown Memphis.

As they began to drive away, many of their guests, including a number of cancer survivors, began tossing navy and white heart-shaped confetti, the kind that is used when a young cancer patient at St. Jude finishes chemotherapy treatments and is celebrated by what is known as a 'no-mo-chemo' party.

The bride's daughter was one of those tossing confetti. "During the wedding, I was crying happy tears because they both mean so much to me," Audrey Wilkerson said.

The Mighty Souls Brass Band greeted those arriving at the reception, and played intermittently throughout the evening before a D.J. took control of the music.



The father of the groom, who knew that his son's wedding day was not promised, broke down in tears when discussing the difficult journey his son, his new daughter-in-law and both their families had been on the past three decades.

"I told a friend one day at lunch that I thought I'd maybe see my son graduate from high school," the elder Mr. Alsup said. "A dad's dreams are wrapped up in his children. So now it's 30 years later, and Joel has Lindsey, Jacob and Audrey, he has a family. My dreams have come true for my son," he said.

Then speaking of Ms. Wilkerson's children, he added: "They gave him a Father's Day card. He called me and said, 'I never thought I'd get a Father's Day card.'"

So too has the dreams for her daughter come true for Ms. Cook, who could be seen at the reception locked in a long, emotional embrace with Dr. Hudson.

"When we arrived at St. Jude, we were told that the bonds we would form with the other families would be the strongest we'd ever know," Ms. Cook said. "And it was true."

Mr. Shadyac said of the newly married couple, "they've loved each other forever. I've seen Lindsey grow up and I've seen the birth of her first child, so that's a double miracle."

Which led to another, Ms. Wilkerson said. "Thanks to St. Jude, I was lucky enough to marry the love of my life, my best friend."

Leanne Kleinmann contributed reporting from Memphis.

## **ON THIS DAY**

**When** Sept. 1, 2018.

**Where** The Danny Thomas/Alsac Pavilion in Memphis.

**September Solidarity** The couple's wedding date was no random selection, as September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month.

**They Love Him Like Crazy** Mr. Alsup is the oldest of three children. At the wedding, his brother, Jim Alsup, was his best man. His sister Emily played keyboards and sang "Crazy Love" with her husband during the processional.

**The Soundtrack Memphis** music played before the service, including Elvis's "Love Me Tender," and "All Shook Up," Aretha Franklin's "Call Me," Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness," and Al Green's "Love and Happiness."

**Former Patients in Attendance** Jennifer Godwin, a spokeswoman for St. Jude, said at least 20 former patients are employees of the hospital. Several childhood cancer survivors attended the wedding, including Carlos Sepulveda, who was Ms. Wilkerson's bridesman. "I don't typically cry at St. Jude events — as a cancer survivor, it takes a lot — but today was different," he said.